

laws and norms are produced, I would add a plea for more anthropological attention to the powers of “moral indignation,” including that which is provoked by the human rights system itself.

Ethnicity, Inc. John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 234 pp.

ELIZABETH HULL

School of Oriental and African Studies

Any visitor to South Africa today cannot fail to notice the mass of advertisements and images that evoke ethnic identity. Township tours, “cultural villages,” and markets selling local handicrafts are the mainstay of tourist experience in a country saturated with ethnic branding. *Ethnicity, Inc.* is a thought-provoking and novel commentary on this widely recognizable phenomenon and offers an important contribution to the classic anthropological themes of ethnicity, culture, and globalization. Drawing on an impressive range of mainly secondary sources, the authors’ approach is not limited by the usual conventions of anthropology but, rather, takes the reader from one global example to another. These illustrations are woven into a comparative, far-reaching discussion that describes succinctly an emerging global phenomenon.

The aim of the book, set out in its opening chapters, is to analyze the characteristics and implications of a global shift from the selling of labor to the selling of culture. It describes the pervasive entry of ethnicity into the marketplace, in an economic context of labor surplus that has left many people with no better choice than to market their identity. The authors are quick to dispel the notion that the commodification of culture necessarily involves its reduction to the superficial, challenging earlier anthropological assumptions about the incommensurability of culture and modernity, a perspective that continues to inform some current anthropological commentary. On the contrary, the authors suggest, the entry of culture into the marketplace may even *enrich* identity. Indeed its commodification may be, from the perspective of those who sell their culture, its critical means of survival. They quote one Tswana man: “If we have nothing of ourselves to sell, does it mean that we *have* no culture? . . . If this is so, then what are we?” (p. 10). The “ethnocommodity” thus disturbs familiar rational-economic definitions of the commodity, for rather than diminishing its worth through replication, it retains—even enhances—its value (p. 20). Similarly, far from alienating its producers, the ethno-commodity may deepen a sense of individual and group identity: “just as culture is being commodified, so the commodity is being rendered explicitly cultural—and, consequently, is in-

creasingly apprehended as the generic source of sociality” (p. 28).

In chapters 4 and 5 the authors define the key characteristics of this phenomenon, what they call “Ethnicity, Inc.,” using a fascinating range of examples from the United States (ch. 4) and South Africa (ch. 5). These include the centrality of biological essence for determining one’s membership within an ethnic group as well as the importance of claims to land and sovereignty for consolidating an exclusive group identity. The most intriguing point to emerge from these chapters is the notion of a dialectic between the incorporation of identity and the commodification of culture. When a plant known for its hunger-suppressing qualities was patented in 1996 it was, with the help of a South African human rights lawyer, soon claimed as the cultural property of the San of South Africa. The hoodia plant became not only a product but the very basis of identity—both legal and cultural—around which San ethnicity was formed (pp. 86–98). In this and other examples of culture commodification, it is the market that prompts claims to identity and generates ethnicity. The political and legal justifications come later. The incorporation of identity, in contrast to the commodification of culture, starts with the merging of an ethnic group into a corporation, only later, as in the case of the Bafokeng, beginning to market cultural symbols and products (pp. 98–114). With these examples, the argument is developed that “Ethnicity, Inc.” begins with one of these but inevitably resolves itself in the other.

A central question posed by the book, and one that demonstrates continuity with the authors’ previous work, asks to what extent “Ethnicity, Inc.” can be seen as an outcome of global neoliberalism. Unsurprisingly, they argue in favor of this claim, concluding that it is the imperatives of capital that have produced both the absorption of identity by the intellectual property regime, as well as a pervasive worldview that defines *personhood*, first and foremost, as “entrepreneurialism of the self and for the self” (p. 130). Herein lies the most provocative argument of the book, developed in chapter 6. The authors use examples from the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and elsewhere, to show that “Ethnicity, Inc.” is part of a wider process in which a range of social institutions and entities, from the state itself down to the individual, are being increasingly defined in terms of business enterprise. Hence an important role of government, having itself become an explicitly corporate entity, is to “creat[e] the conditions for its entrepreneurial and ethno-preneurial subjects to realize their aspirations, by treating those subjects as, above all else, stakeholders in the corporate nation” (p. 128). Demonstrating their proverbial ability to produce new meaning through inverting and reinventing familiar ideas, the authors suggest that where corporations initially gained the legal status and rights of an individual, it is individuals that now assume corporate roles (p. 130). The commodifying of

ethnicity—ethnopreneurialism—is an absolute expression of this: the congealing into tangible, marketable, owned products those signs, symbols, and practices that signify individual and group *essence*.

The reader is reminded now and again of the open-ended and contingent nature of these processes. This problem is finally addressed in the conclusion, where several instances of historical particularity are offered. In this way, the argument escapes the criticism that its presuppositions are deterministic. A question that reoccurs throughout the book is whether “Ethnicity, Inc.” offers something positive or whether it makes use of existing lines of privilege or dis-

advantage, even atrocity. A final vivid example of the tourist industry that has formed around the killing fields of Rwanda reveals the ugly potential for ethnicity to “make capital even out of its own capacity for destruction” (p. 145).

This concise and richly demonstrated book makes an important contribution to anthropological understandings of ethnicity and identity, and the role of these within the marketplace. *Ethnicity, Inc.* will appeal not only to anthropologists but also to anyone with an interest in cultural and national symbols and their commodification, the increasing reach of the intellectual property regime, and the changing global role of the state.